

Chiappe wears skeleton suit at meeting to protest Centinela Valley adult ed cuts

By Rob Kuznia Staff Writer Daily Breeze

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Under normal circumstances, it might be easy for elected school board members to discount the lament of a solo activist who arrives at a public meeting wearing a skeleton costume - complete with a bone-through-the-head feature - to protest the "bare-bones budget."

But the agitator at this week's Centinela Valley school board meeting was Cristina Chiappe, a fixture in the community and current school board member of the neighboring K-8 Hawthorne School District, whose students feed into Centinela's high schools.

Chiappe is upset that the Centinela Valley school district - which is composed of Lawndale, Hawthorne and Leuzinger high schools - has gutted the adult education program for which she has worked for a dozen years. The cut actually happened about a month ago, but Chiappe is unwilling to let it go without making some noise, even though she says that she personally is not in danger of losing out on any income.

"Adult ed serves this poor community," said Chiappe, who teaches a class for aspiring medical assistants. "I beg you that you leave this community with some meat on the bone, because the skeleton only allows you to stand. But what really makes the body move? The muscles."

Also upset with the move is teachers union President Jack Foreman, who criticized the district Tuesday night for making the deep cut while at the same time granting raises to managers and some of its top administrators. (Superintendent Jose Fernandez acknowledged that the district granted a \$7,000 raise last month to Assistant Superintendent Benjamin Wolf, whose salary went from \$143,000 to \$150,000.)

"There have been examples in this community - I think in Lennox - where we have had management actually accept a cut in salary," he said. "I think that is something that would send a message to the community of ... shared sacrifice."

The Centinela Valley Union High School District eliminated about 85 percent of its adult education program in mid-March. At the time, the district seemed to be following the lead of the Los Angeles Unified School District, which had proposed a wholesale elimination of adult education but ultimately spared much of the program.

School officials in Centinela Valley say they will reinstate much of it at a later date, should California voters approve Gov. Jerry Brown's tax-hike initiative in November.

Centinela Valley school officials paint the issue as a game of priorities: When times are tough, what are you going to sacrifice, programs for adults or programs for kids? Superintendent Fernandez said that the district could, for instance, spare adult education by raising average class sizes in the high schools.

"But I don't think the parents in the community want class sizes at 40," he said. "We can only do so much with what we have."

He added that Centinela Valley is far from the only school district to cut adult education, noting that the Bellflower school board eliminated its program last month.

"It had a wonderful program that dealt with cosmetology," he said. "It was a leader. It was closed."

Meanwhile, Chiappe has the support of Hawthorne school board President Alexandre Monteiro.

"I don't think she's fighting for herself, she's fighting for those hundreds of people who could have benefited in the program for years to come," he said. "I think unfortunately they are not listening."

Monteiro went on to criticize the Centinela Valley district for the way in which it made the cuts.

"They have not been truly up front with the community," he said. "They should have been more transparent. ... We know the adult education program is very important to our community because those programs have always been full."

Still, the issue comes a time when almost all the players involved find themselves in a bit of an awkward situation. Administrators have to defend recommending drastic budget cuts even as the district's highest earners receive raises. The Centinela Valley teachers union must temper its criticism of administrative raises in light of how its members benefited from a 1.75 percent bump this year. (It was the first teacher raise in the district since 2007.) Chiappe is criticizing the district for making cuts when her own Hawthorne school board laid off some 50 teachers this year.

But she insists they are apples and oranges, primarily because students in her adult ed class must pay a fee of \$1,050.

"I'm not doing this to be a clown," she added. "I'm doing this because I want to bring awareness to the community about what's going on."

The Centinela Valley school board did make one symbolic move Tuesday night to address accusations of failing to share the sacrifice: they put a moratorium on out-of-state travel. Tuesday night's vote came a few weeks after Chiappe criticized the board for authorizing a trip to Boston for a conference. The board won't be attending that conference or any other this year.

"I understand the importance of going to conferences," said school board President Rocio Pizano. "I don't think we can save a job (with the money saved). It's more of a gesture. Given the economy, we wanted to make this gesture to the community."

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